**The Nicene Creed (part three)**

Rev. David Waldron

**Scriptures:** Genesis 17:10-14; Mathew 26:26-29; Acts 2:36-41

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 371, 102, 312, 291, 117

**Series:** Nicene Creed (part 3)

**Theme:** The meaning of the phrase in the fourth section of the Nicene Creed ‘one baptism for the remission of sins’.

**Proposition:** Baptism is a sign which points to the forgiveness of sins in Christ.

**Introduction**

If you hear the word ‘remission’ you likely think of someone who has suffered from cancer but now has been told by their doctor that the disease they once had is ‘in remission’. Here ‘remission’ has the meaning of ‘a **temporary** reduction in the severity of a disease. However, the word ‘remission’ in the English language also refers to the **permanent** ‘cancellation of a debt, charge or penalty.’ This is the sense of the word in the phrase from the Nicene Creed “*I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins*.”

In the previous two sermons in this short series, we’ve already noted that the Nicene Creed contains four parts:

1. Belief about God the Father
2. Belief about Jesus the Son
3. Belief about the Holy Spirit
4. Belief about the church universal

Other than the Apostles’ Creed, the Nicene Creed is likely the most universally accepted and recognised statement of the Christian faith. You may recall from the first sermon in this series about this creed that the last two sections of the Nicene Creed were added in 381AD at the Council of Constantinople. Before then the Nicene Creed, which originated in Nicea in 325AD, just contained the first two parts of what we have now: a statement of faith about God the Father and Jesus the Son.

In the fourth section of the Nicene Creed, after the statement about ‘one holy catholic and apostolic church’, there is the phrase “*I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins*’. The ‘remission of sins’ is the cancellation of the debt which sin produces in the sinner. The penalty which must be paid is death (Rom 6:23). To remit sins is therefore to cancel the death penalty.

We find the phrase ‘*be baptized…for the remission of sins*’ in the King James version of the Bible (Acts 2:38). In more modern translations, the word ‘remission’ is rendered as ‘forgiveness’ (e.g. ESV, NASB, NIV). The underlying Greek word literally means to ‘put some distance between.’ Think for a moment about Dame Valerie Adams; to ‘put some distance between’ is like the work of an Olympic shot putter throwing a metal ball. The basic idea is that of an action which causes separation by sending away from oneself, putting away, or hurling away. This work is vividly portrayed in the sending away of the ‘scapegoat’ upon which the High Priest in Old Testament Israel symbolically placed the confessed sins of the people. The goat then bore ‘*all their iniquities on itself to a remote area*’ (Lev 16:22).

So we could accurately translate the Nicene Creed phrase ‘One baptism for the remission of sins’ into ‘one baptism for the forgiveness of sins’ or ‘one baptism for the putting away/removal of sins’ or even ‘one baptism for the removal of the death penalty for sin.’ A big question remains though in understanding what this actually means. The interpretation hinges on the little word ‘for.’

Think about this. When we say that a person is ‘wanted for murder,’ we don’t usually mean that he or she is wanted **so that** he or she can kill someone! – although that is grammatically possible in the English language. ‘For’ can mean ‘for the purpose of.’ So if this is the meaning in the Nicene Creed then we could say ‘one baptism so that sins can be forgiven.’

However, what we usually mean when we say that a person is ‘wanted for murder’ is that he or she is wanted **because**, or as a result of, the fact that he or she has **already** killed somebody. If this is the meaning in the Nicene Creed, then we could say ‘one baptism because sins have already been forgiven’. We’re going to look at these two very different possible interpretations under two headings:

1. Baptism – a work of regeneration?
2. Baptism – a sign of Christ’s completed work
3. **Baptism – a work of regeneration?**

When a forest fire has devastated an area of all visible plant life, we speak of the regeneration which can occur when re-growth takes place. Many areas of New Zealand bush have been previously logged and are ‘secondary’ regenerated forest. Theologically, ‘regeneration’ means a spiritual transformation, from death to life.

If baptism has the purpose of forgiving sins, then baptism is a work of regeneration in the person who is baptised. Baptism is termed a ‘sacrament’, although this is not a Biblical word as such. It comes from the Latin word “sacramentum” meaning “sacred thing”, a translation of the Greek word ‘mysterion’. There’s a Latin phrase which is used to describe the belief that a sacrament confers divine grace which changes a person: ‘Ex opere operato’ – literally ‘from the work performed’. This is a view which became a part of the official teaching of the Roman Catholic church. During the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century, the Council of Trent condemned the proposition that ‘grace is **not** conferred ex opere operato’. This Roman Catholic church council wanted to make clear that sacraments convey grace ‘from the work performed’ by the sacrament itself.

Looking back to the writing of the fourth section of the Nicene Creed at the council of Constantinople – what was meant back then by ‘one baptism for the remission of sins’? It’s always difficult to review history and be certain about what people in the past were thinking when they wrote something down. However, given the range of views in the early New Testament church it is likely that some of the pastors and theologians at the Council of Constantinople assumed or believed that baptism necessarily confers what it signifies: removal of the death penalty for sins. The theological term for this is view is called ‘baptismal regeneration’.

In order to know whether there is such a thing as spiritual regeneration by means of baptism we need to look at Scripture. Let’s begin with the other sacrament. When Jesus instituted the Lord’s Supper He said: "*Take, eat; this is my body." And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many* ***for*** *the forgiveness of sins*” (Matt 26:26b-28). Did you spot that little word ‘for’ again? Jesus spoke about the wine representing His blood ‘*poured out for many* ***for*** *the forgiveness of sins*.’ Does this mean that anyone who drinks the wine at a Lord’s Supper celebration has at least some of their sins either fully or at least partially forgiven? Does Lord’s Supper work ‘ex opere operato’ – ‘from the work performed by the sacrament?

No. let me show you. When writing about the sacrament of Lord’s Supper, the Apostle Paul warned the Corinthians (1 Cor 11:29-30) that many of them had eaten and drunk judgement on themselves, many had become weak and ill, some had died. Clearly in those cases the Supper **did not** confer what it signified: forgiveness of sins – the removal of the death penalty, but the exact opposite – divine judgement which resulted in death for som.

After preaching on the Day of Pentecost after the resurrection of Christ, the Apostle Peter exhorted those who were listening to ‘*save yourselves from this crooked generation*’ (Acts 2:40). Then we read that ‘*those who received his word were baptised, and there were added that day about three thousand souls*’ (Acts 2:41). It is possible to conclude from these words of Luke that this mass baptism itself saved every one of that number of about 3,000 people. Yet we know from subsequent revelation that some of the 1st century Christians who had previously confessed faith (and presumably following the command of Christ had been baptised), fell away from the Lord. Paul writes to Timothy about Hymenaeus and Alexander who had made ‘shipwreck of their faith’ (1 Tim 1:20). We don’t know whether they came back to the Lord and therefore whether they are amongst God’s elect. John writes of some false teachers who had left the community of believers: “*They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us*” (1 John 2:19).

Just because a person has been baptised, whether as an infant or as an adult when they publicly profess faith, does not mean that they are saved. Baptism does not convey grace ‘from the work performed’ by the sacrament itself.

There is another concept which is closely related to ‘baptismal regeneration’ which is called ‘presumptive regeneration’. This idea is often associated with Abraham Kuyper, an influential theologian who was the Prime Minister of the Netherlands in the early 20th century (between 1901 and 1905). The 1905 synod of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands, which met in Utrecht declared in their ‘conclusions’ that : “*According to the confession of our churches, the seed of the covenant, by virtue of the promise of God, is to be considered regenerated and sanctified in Christ, until the contrary should become evident from their doctrine and conduct as they grow up*” (Acts of Synod, article 158).

The doctrine of presumptive regeneration teaches that all baptised church members whose lives show no evidence to the contrary may be presumed to be regenerated. The 1905 "Conclusions of Utrecht" were adopted by the Synod of the Christian Reformed Church in North America in 1908. They were challenged from time to time, given an "official interpretation" by the Synod of 1962, and finally set aside in 1968. For 63 years the official teaching of this reformed church had been unbiblical.

Those who recognised the error of the church charged this doctrine of presumptive regeneration with providing parents, and especially young adults with a **false ground** for the assurance of their salvation. They saw that parents began to regard their children as saved just because they were baptised. Presumptive regeneration has been believed by some parents in our New Zealand Reformed Churches, even quite recently, expressed this way. ‘*Because we have baptised them, we presume that our children are saved, at least up until the age of discernment’*.

The Reformed Churches of New Zealand do not hold to the doctrines of baptismal regeneration or presumptive regeneration, although many in evangelical churches think that we do. Baptism itself is not a work of regeneration. Baptism does not convey grace ‘from the work performed’ by the sacrament itself. As a Reformed church, when we confess in the Nicene Creed that “*I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins*’ we are **not** saying that baptism itself causes (either in part or in full) the forgiveness of sins.

So what, you may well ask, are we confessing in this creed regarding baptism? That question brings us to our second point.

1. **Baptism – a sign of Christ’s completed work**

Remember the second use of the word ‘for’. A person was wanted for murder because they had **already** committed the crime. Somewhat similarly, a person is baptised because Christ has **already** forgiven sins. Baptism is not the agent of forgiveness, but a sign which points to the completed work of Christ.

One of the greatest theological divisions amongst Christians who seriously study and deeply believe the Bible relates to baptism. Many evangelical churches teach that baptism is **only** to be administered to those who have personally come to saving faith. Baptism then is seen as an outward sign that they have already individually had their sins forgiven in Christ. In Reformed, confessional Presbyterian and confessional Anglican churches, baptism is not only administered to those who come to faith as adults (and who have not previously been baptised) but also the children of a believing parent or parents. The point of difference then is not baptism itself, but whether or not young children who have not personally repented and believed in Christ as their Lord and Saviour should be baptised.

Across all Christian churches all believers can in good conscience recite the words from the Nicene Creed “*I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins*’. All Bible -believing Christians affirm that a person should only be baptised **once** in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Matt 28:19). The disagreement comes as to exactly what reality baptism points to.

It is very helpful to see that circumcision in the Old Testament was a sign of the covenant (Gen 17:11) which was to be applied to every male child within the community of Israel. Circumcision pointed to the reality that God had made a covenant with the whole of Israel to be their God and that they would be His holy people (e.g. Ex 19:6). Yet we know that individual circumcision never guaranteed personal salvation. Both of the twin brothers Esau and Jacob were circumcised, but God loved the younger and not the older (Mal 1:2-3; quoted in Rom 9:13). Esau’s sins were not remitted. He was not forgiven by God. His circumcision was not a personal guarantee of salvation to him.

Circumcision did not point to the state of an individual, but to the promise of God to save many people. This principle also applies to baptism. As we’ve already seen baptism does not guarantee the forgiveness of sins in individuals, either in young children or adults. Christian baptism does not function ‘ex opere operato’ – from the work performed. Baptism is not a sign which in and of itself points to the salvation state of the individual.

Personal faith is only indicated if what is signified (the completed work of Christ) is applied to the baptised person by the Holy Spirit. This is reflected in our form for the baptism of adults. We do not believe that the baptism itself conveys any forgiveness to the person having water sprinkled on them. We do believe that the vows which they make in publicly professing their faith are evidence of saving faith in the completed work of Christ. If His work has been applied to them by the Spirit, then they are saved and once saved will always be so. Jesus said “*My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand*” (John 10:27-29).

Likewise, when a young child is baptised, we do not believe that their baptism conveys any forgiveness to them. However, we do hope and pray that they will come to saving faith as they grow and develop and that they will one day make vows as they publicly profess their own faith. We know that the gospel call goes out widely, to the children of believers and to people in every tribe tongue and nation, as the Apostle Peter confirmed on the Day of Pentecost: “*For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself*." (Acts 2:39)

God is pleased to use the preaching, teaching and examples of Christian living in the community of the church to bring many children of believers to faith, but not all. He is pleased to use the preaching, teaching and examples of Christian living in the community of the church to bring many who have not grown up in Christian homes to faith in Christ.

In summary Christian baptism is a **sign** which points to the forgiveness of sins of many in Christ, it does not convey the grace of forgiveness itself to anyone. Remember this next time you recite the words of the Nicene Creed: “*I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins*’. Remember the glorious work of Christ whose perfect life and death in the place of others enables the forgiveness of sins for everyone whom the Lord our God calls to Himself.

AMEN.